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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LUANDA 000734

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL AO
SUBJECT: SAMAKUVA DISCUSSES UNITA'S DEFEAT AND NEXT STEPS

Classified By: AMB DAN MOZENA FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: During a September 25 call on the Ambassador, UNITA President Isaias Samakuva accepted the results of Angola's September 5 parliamentary elections, despite the "serious irregularities" that marred them, for the "good of the country." The new parliament's first order of business, he thought, would be to ratify a draft constitution, using a draft originally negotiated between UNITA and the ruling MPLA. Samakuva conceded that his party was at least partially responsible for its defeat, but said that UNITA might not participate in presidential elections next year without a more even political playing field. Despite his party's disastrous showing at the polls, Samakuva was reconfirmed as UNITA's leader the day following his meeting with Ambassador. End Summary

ELECTION IRREGULARITIES, INTERNAL WEAKNESSES

¶2. (C) UNITA President Isaias Samakuva, accompanied by Party Vice-President Ernesto Mulato and key advisor Jardo Muakelia called on the Ambassador September 25; it was Samakuva's first meeting with the Ambassador since UNITA's crushing defeat in the September 5-6 legislative elections. Samakuva lamented the "serious irregularities" of election day and recited a litany of concerns about the conduct of the elections, particularly regarding failure to accredit some UNITA poll watchers and alleged government interference with the process. Despite an assertion that "the elections do not reflect the will of the people," however, Samakuva was not willing to speculate on how these irregularities might have impacted the final vote.

¶3. (C) When pressed by the Ambassador on whether his party had learned any lessons from its performance in the legislative elections, Samakuva said UNITA "has to be sufficiently honest to recognize mistakes and correct them," adding "we can't only blame others." He conceded that the party has an image problem and expressed the hope that, moving forward, memories of the war and its division would fade, and the electorate would be more accepting of UNITA.

ACCEPTANCE, &FOR THE GOOD OF THE COUNTRY

¶4. (C) Despite concerns, UNITA accepted the results of the elections. Samakuva told the Ambassador the party's game plan is to document "for the sake of history" the problems of the elections, adding (twice) that his party "does not want to make a fuss" about the irregularities. He said he had accepted the election results, despite all known irregularities, "for the good of the country" and to defuse the tensions that started to build as the one-sided elections results were announced. Samakuva stated that UNITA had lost a badly-organized election, but had "won the right to participate in other, better organized elections, on a regular basis and a pre-determined timeline." (Note: Despite the fact that the last National Assembly sat for 16 years, the Angolan Constitution calls for legislative elections every four years. President dos Santos repeatedly affirmed

his commitment to regular legislative elections during the campaign. End Note.)

A NEW CONSTITUTION

15. (C) Assessing the new National Assembly that will emerge from the elections, Samakuva said he was hopeful the ruling MPLA would respect the opposition and engage it in the legislative process. He opined that the MPLA - despite a "one-party culture" - would want to be on good behavior to burnish its democratic credentials with the international community. Samakuva gave the MPLA credit for saying good things about working with the opposition in parliament, and expressed his hope that the ruling party would allow other voices to be heard.

16. (C) Samakuva said the Assembly's main order of business would be to enact a new constitution. He opined that the MPLA would propose the draft constitution that the MPLA and UNITA had largely agreed upon before the negotiations broke down in 2006, over differences regarding the extent of presidential powers and symbolic but emotive issues like the design of Angola's flag and the words of the national anthem.

Samakuva opined that the MPLA would now push through a constitution that reflected the MPLA's position on these issues.

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: UNITA SITTING OUT A ROUND?

17. (C) Looking ahead to the 2009 presidential elections,

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Samakuva declared that he "was not sure that it will be worthwhile to participate" if the environment was not better.

He lamented the uneven playing field that gives the ruling party unequal access to the media and to resources and said the party faces a long-term political struggle to make the playing field more level. When asked whether his party could survive a boycott of the presidential elections, Samakuva responded that there was no point in participating in an unequal contest and pointed out that UNITA's participation in and acceptance of a flawed process would give the ruling party a mantle of undeserved legitimacy. He said he intends to raise these concerns about the playing field with civil society and in the National Assembly to encourage public debate on the issue, one which he conceded would "take years to address."

SAMAKUVA LIVES TO FIGHT ANOTHER DAY

18. (C) In a speech to the Permanent Committee prior to his meeting with the Ambassador, Samakuva had accepted responsibility for his party's defeat and said he would follow the will of the party if asked to resign. In a session the day after Samakuva's meeting with the Ambassador, the Committee unanimously endorsed Samakuva as leader of the party and, presumably, UNITA's candidate for the 2009 presidential elections, should the party choose to participate.

19. (C) COMMENT: In the wake of its crushing defeat at the polls, UNITA faces a daunting task in trying to present itself as an effective voice for Angola's weakened opposition and a credible alternative to the MPLA. The ruling party certainly has an enormous advantage in terms of control of the media and access to vast resources, but UNITA makes a bad situation worse by its inability to successfully project a new, positive image or to present meaningful policy alternatives that resonate with voters. Samakuva probably has it right in suggesting that it will take years before UNITA can mount an effective challenge, and in that context it makes sense that the party would buy itself some time to reconnect with voters, rebuild a stronger constituency and

conserve its depleted resources by sitting out Presidential elections. END COMMENT
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